

**RG-50.030.1074**

**March 14, 2020, Spartanburg County, S.C, U.S.A.**

**Summary**

Sándor Kóser was born on November 24, 1929 in Vári (Vari, Carpatho-Ruthenia, Ukraine), a village close to Beregszász (Berehove). His father, Dezső (1903) was a fruit merchant who delivered fresh fruit to Prague [after the Trianon Treaty of 1920, Vári became part of Czechoslovakia]. His mother was Julianna Weisz (1906). He had an older sister Helén (1927), and a younger sister, Éva (1931). They were relatively well-to-do as compared to the local ca. 200 Jews, none of whom were wealthy.

The family was religious. They kept a kosher household and celebrated Sabbath and the holidays. They spoke Yiddish at home, but also Hungarian, which was the language his parents had learned. There was a small synagogue in the village, but no rabbi. One of the congregation led the prayers. Most of the Jews were Orthodox. There was a shakhter in the village. They had good relations with Christian Hungarians.

He attended elementary school in Vári, and middle school in Beregszász, to which he commuted every day. He would have liked to go to the eight-year high school, but in 1940/1941 Jews were no longer accepted there. Teaching was in Hungarian, since in Vári and Beregszász the majority of population was Hungarian.

Life became harder after the Hungarian occupation in [November] 1938. His parents were initially enthusiastic about the Hungarian occupation, as were most Jews, but soon a new village clerk, a town crier, and teachers arrived from Hungary, and the old ones were ousted. The *Levente* [youth paramilitary organization] also arrived, as did the *Rongyos Gárda* (Fascist voluntary paramilitary organization, which operated with the approval of Hungarian authorities), and the Arrow Cross, which organized a local branch. Kálmán Szabó, the butcher, and Gerzsényi were the leaders. Anti-Semitic propaganda became prevalent.

He remembered that in middle school, his math teacher, Mrs. Harsányi complained all the time that the “dirty Jews buy up everything in the market and left nothing for us.” The school principle humiliated him by telling him to clean his house after school. At the train station, he was sent out from the waiting room because he was Jewish. Some classmates shunned him. However, Kálmán Kamenyecki, his desk mate in school, never rejected sitting next to him. His father was often called up for forced labor. In 1941, after someone denounced him because he was listening to the BBC, he was placed in a correctional company and sent to the East. His mother tried to continue the business. They had no bread, because at the request of the Hungarian authorities they had to turn in most of the grain they had.

In February 1944, his father had a day leave from his company commander who was a decent officer. He told his family that his company had to bury the Jews massacred at Kamenets-Podolsky and Babi-Yar. He warned his family that they would be deported and wanted to take József, his son with him, because he thought he could protect him. His wife, József's mother, did not let him go.

In April 1944, on the last day of Passover, a Sunday morning, the village crier announced that Jews had to report to the schoolyard. At the meeting, a gendarme told them that they would be transferred to the Hortobágy in Hungary and they had half an hour to pack. Jewelry, money, IDs had to be turned in. From Vári, they were taken to Beregszász, to the courtyard of the

synagogue where they spent a day. He remembered that as they were leaving Vári, neighbors already went into their house and took their belongings. They experienced very little empathy from the people in the village. Most were indifferent, calculating what they could get of the Jewish property left behind. In Beregszász, the Jews were lying or sitting on the ground, and there were no facilities, no water, etc. The next day, they had to walk to the brick factory of Vári Sándor, which had a railway connection. They spent a month in this improvised camp. He did not remember whether Hungarian authorities provided food. The Jews had to dig a latrine. There was no running water. All along, he emphasized that only Hungarian authorities, mainly gendarmes, were involved in the process. Women over the age of 13 were subjected to body searches.

On May 22 or 23, they were entrained. Gendarmes, but not the local ones were at the entrainment. There was no room to sit down in the railroad wagon, the room for sitting was saved for old people and young children. It was very hot and everybody was very thirsty. It was clear that they would not be taken to the Hortobágy, especially when they reached the Hungarian border at Kassa (Kosice) and German SS took over the guarding from Hungarian gendarmes. His uncle asked a German railway worker, where they were going, and he indicated with his hand that they were sent under the ground. He remembered that his uncle was crying and embracing his family.

One early morning they arrived in Auschwitz. Polish prisoners in uniforms rushed to the wagons to empty them. They told him to say that he was older and told mothers with young children to give their children to older women. At the time, they did not understand why. At selection, he said that he was 16 (though not yet even 15) and was sent to the right. He was sent to the shower, received striped prisoner's garb and a cap.

He did not remember in which barracks he was, but a couple of days later when he was walking among the barracks, he was pushed into a group of Russian POWs who were about to be transported to Buchenwald. He found someone who knew some Hungarian because he had been a POW in Hungary during WWI. From then on, he was protected by the underground anti-Fascist and Communist movement in Buchenwald, which tried to save children. They maintained a children's barracks, and he was sent there. They received clothing and somewhat better food than in Auschwitz. They worked in a munitions factory, but had a light workload: collecting debris, cleaning, etc. There were other Hungarian boys in his group as well, but also Czechs, Yugoslavs, Russians, etc. When he became ill with scabies, a Hungarian doctor, who fought in Spain and was a political prisoner, saved his life.

He met the owner of the Beregszász brick factory by chance, who had no shoes and was desperate. He managed to get a pair of shoes for him, and was promised to get 10 *hold* [ca. 14 acres] of land after the war (he found out later that the brick factory owner emigrated to Los Angeles).

Their part of the camp was guarded by Ukrainians in black uniforms, and ethnic Germans from Transylvania. Some of them spoke Hungarian and he overheard their conversations.

In the fall of 1944, the Russian prisoners learned that the German camp command intended to eliminate the youth camp. One day someone advised him to go to work at the airplane factory as a locksmith apprentice. He had no idea what a locksmith did, but he and others ended up in a transport sent to the airplane factory in Niederorschel [a sub-camp of Buchenwald; airplane

parts were not manufactured there, but in Mühlhausen II, another sub-camp]. He learned to work with drill and jackhammer, and the work in the factory saved his life.

In March 1944, artillery fire was very close. The SS decided to evacuate the camp and the prisoners were set on a foot march toward west. One morning they realized that the SS guards had fled. The U.S. Army soon arrived. [Not clear from the narrative where Mr. Kóser was at liberation].

He spent about a month in Buchenwald, recuperating. Since he lived in Carpatho-Ruthenia, he was put on a bus that the Czechoslovak government sent for the liberated Czechs. He was taken to Prague, and from there he traveled to Bratislava, Budapest, and home.

His father was waiting for him. His father had escaped from his forced labor company and was at home since December 1944. His sisters survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. His mother perished in Auschwitz.

Their home was empty, except for a pair of ice-skates. The villagers said that the Germans took everything. He saw a girl though who had dress made from a tallit [prayer shawl].

He continued his schooling and graduated from high school in 1949. He wished to study engineering, but in the end became a biology-chemistry teacher. He went to university in Ungvár (Uzhhorod, Ukraine). He learned Russian very well. After graduating in 1954, he married, and he and his wife were teaching in a small town.

In 1987, they repatriated to Hungary and lived in Budapest, where he also taught.

His son left for the United States in 1986. When he retired, in the late 1990s, he and his wife joined their son in the U.S. Their son had died not long before the interview.

In the short second part of the interview, he explained the origin of his very rare last name, Kóser (kosher): his great-grandfather was Lipót Kohn, but his Hebrew first name was Moshe, and the sounding of these two names resulted in Kóser. His grandfather had this name on his tombstone.